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ABSTRACT

This collection of selected reminiscences of a volunteer teacher in the Pennsylvania prison system recounts her experiences teaching illiterate and near-illiterate prisoners (and others) how to read. The collection describes several different individuals (in and out of prison), their diverse reactions to reading, and their understanding and use of language. The first part of the collection focuses on prisoners, while the second part discusses Vietnamese refugees learning to read English and welfare mothers preparing for their GED exams. A postlude muses on some educational issues relevant to reading. (NKA)

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CHRONICLES of A WORD-WATCHER at WORK

Dorothy Spicker Murray

September ~ 1999

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CHRONICLES OF A

WORD WATCHER AT WORK

Dorothy Speicher Murray

September ~ 1999

TO

The Honorable Oscar F. Spicer,
President Judge, 51st Judicial District,

who opened prison doors
for our classes and who
kept them open for years

AND

ALL THOSE who entered these doors
to wrestle with words

MY SINCERE THANKS

A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

~ ~ ~ ~

Without the repeated suggestions of Arlene Shealer, who went to jail with me, that I go public with these stories, they would have remained unwritten.

Without the repeated reminders of her daughter, Lissy Weirich, I might never have started to write them.

It could be that they had both grown so tired of hearing these stories that they urged me to write and then forget them.

While I credit them for their part in this undertaking I do try to refrain from taking responsibility for Arlene's winning the Orville Redenbacher essay contest in 1990. She had been selected as one of twelve winners from nearly fourteen thousand essays submitted. She had been, until then, the only person from Pennsylvania ever to have received this award. I could claim even less credit for the 3.8 average she maintained and the receipt of a full year's credit for first year English plus fifteen hours more as a result of tests she had passed.

Without the editing and printing of the stories by Margaret Senft, friend and neighbor, they would have remained unavailable to the outside world. If she is to be believed, and there is no reason not to believe her, she enjoyed the hard work, asking near its end, "What shall we do next?"

Editor's note: Dorothy was a joy to work with - her love of words and the correct use of them is obvious. Our collaboration taught me many things and I shall always remember the experience with great pleasure. I look forward to our next project.

Margaret

PREFACE

~~~

That there should be one man
die ignorant
who had capacity for knowledge
this I call a tragedy.

Thomas Carlyle:- 1795-1881

~~~

With these words this English writer and social critic expressed his concern for the illiterate of his day.

Had he, like me, felt alone in his sympathy for those who could not read because they had been born less privileged than he? Perhaps he, too, felt guilt because he had inherited more word wealth than others in his time.

I do not know how the numbers of illiterate in Carlyle's day compare to those in ours. Perhaps the percentages of the illiterate then were higher and more visible than in ours today, for the nineteenth-century elite seemed quite comfortable in their good fortune. They were probably sincere in their belief that the working class had neither the ability nor desire to read and write. Certainly, it would not have had the leisure to indulge in the luxury of literacy.

Sometimes I wonder whether - buried beneath the indifference to the plight of those less fortunate in our own generation I sense, - lie remnants of that old assumption of a superiority endowed by the accident of birth.

Carlyle has not been alone in his concern for the illiterate. Alexis de Tocqueville and Henry Adams in their day warned of the dangers an illiterate majority could place on a government of the people by the people.

The stories that follow reflect my own concerns for those who do not enjoy the pleasure and privileges of the literate. They record my experiences volunteering in Pennsylvania *OUTSIDE* the system. I have applied what I had learned and used when happily employed *INSIDE* the system elsewhere.

Would that I had been able to weave my discontent into the tapestry of these stories as gracefully as writers of satire, unhappy with certain aspects of their own culture, had patterned into theirs.

But then a Cervantes, a Swift, a Thurber - or even a Dorothy Parker - I am not.

Dorothy Murray - 1999

LENNIE LEARNS TO READ

"I know I don't belong in this class, but I always wanted to learn to read."

With these words, Lennie (name borrowed from an American classic) apologized for his presence in our prison class when he showed up that first evening.

Labeled with an IQ of under eighty, in special education classes at the local Lincoln Intermediate Unit 12, twenty-four year-old Lennie had brought with him that evening only a recognition of the names of the twenty-six letters of the English alphabet and his desire to learn to read the language he could speak.

We welcomed Lennie, assuring him that he had come to the right place. Here he had only to ask questions and join us in the search for answers - our modus operandi. For Lennie, asking questions would come easy; finding answers would be more difficult.

Even when he discovered that only five of the twenty-six letters (A ~ E ~ I ~ O ~ U) would answer to their names, he was not discouraged. Neither was he dismayed when he found that these twenty-six letters must represent the thirty-seven significant speech sounds in the Pennsylvania version of the English language we shared.

To solve this disparity and provide a means to present words for spelling, I had invented a code in which each of those thirty-seven significant speech sounds had its own symbol. With this key, Lennie unlocked the door to literacy.

(SEE CODE)

Lennie had clung to this artificial English long after others in his class had abandoned it for the real thing. I spent hours encoding stories for Lennie to read and hours more decoding Lennie's writings. It was worth the effort, for his class too enjoyed decoding, especially the Thurber Fables I had prepared for Lennie.

The first time I remember hearing Lennie laugh aloud was after we decoded the end of one of them:

MORaL: iT iS BeTaR TOO HaeV LOFT aeNE LaST THaeN NeVaR TOO HaeV LOFT aeT aL.

. (SEE FABLE IN CODE)

And so Lennie would "sound" out these coded words long before he could spell them in regular English. His classmates often withheld their own answers to allow Lennie the time he needed to decode the five words on the blackboard for spelling, words brought in that the class felt a high school graduate should be able to spell.

This challenge posed by an obstreperous language was the source of much of that laughter that puzzled the guards on duty near the monitor.

"What on earth could be so funny about a reading class to cause all that laughter up there?" they would sometimes ask when they unlocked doors to release us to another world. They would have understood had they been with us when

/RaF/

was on the board to be decoded and spelled ...

In discarded large-print Reader's Digests, Lennie looked for examples of what he thought confirmed statements about English words under investigation. When he found one, he underlined it, copied it in writing, recopied it later under its proper rubric, and along with the others presented it to the class for confirmation.

For instance, Lennie's contribution of the word /rain/ as an example of a word containing an /Ā/ sound was as appropriate, as acceptable, as longer words like /maintain/.

<A>	<AI>	<AY>	<EY>	<EA>	<ei>	<EIGH>
ate	rain maintain	day	they	great	rein	eight
/AT/	/RAN/ /MANTAN/	/DA/	/thA/	/grAT/	/RAN/	/AT/

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Code

/A/	/E/	/I/	/O/	/U/	/OY/	/OW/	/OO/
Age	wE	Ice	gO	Use	'nOY	cOW	bOOt
/B/	/D/	/F/	/G/	/K/	/L/	/M/	/N/
Be	Do	iF	Go	KiCK	Let	Me	No
/P/	/S/	/T/	/V/	/Z/	/ŋ/	/TH/	/Č/
Put	See	To	Van	Zero	long	THin	CHin
/ǰ/	/Š/	/Ž/		/H/	/R/	/W/	/Y/
Just	SHe	aZure		Heat	Red	Wed	Yes
/æ/	/a/	/e/	/ɨ/	/ø/	/oo/		
can	all	met	it	other	foot	-	37

/Aǰ/	/WE/	/IS/	/GO/	/UZ/	/BOY/	/KOW/	/BOOT/

FROM

AN OPEN INVITATION TO EXPLORE THE WILY WAYS OF WORDS

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THE COURTSHIP of ARTHUR and AL.
by
JAMES Thurber

YOUNG DON A TIM WHO WAS A YOUNG NEVER NOTED ART. ART AND OLDER NEVER NOTED ARTHUR. HIS WAR DIED IN LAV WITH A BRITE LITTEL FINNL. HE LOVED WITH DISFAVOR DON HIS YOUNG NEVER BECAZ HE WAZ A HARUM-SKARUM ARTD A NO-GOOD. HE HATED NEVER DON A SINGLE. NO (pune) OV WORK IN HIZ LIF, FOR HE PREFARD TOO ET ARTD SLEP ARTD TOO SWIM LAZILE IN HIS STREME ARTD TOO PLA CASING GAME WITH HIS GIRLZ. HIZ OLDER BROTHER HATED DON NOTHING BUT WORK FROM HIS DA HE GOT HIS FIRST TERM. HE HATED NEVER PLAD ANYTHING WITH ANYBODE.

WHEN HIS YOUNG NEVER ARTED HIS FINNL TOO MORE HIM, HE SED HE WOULDNT THINK OV IT ANY-LES HE APPRECIATED TOO HAVING. HE REMINED HIM WHAT A BRAVE HATED BILT THIPTE-TOO DOZE ARTD WAZ WALKIG ON THEE NOR, WHENZ HE, ART, HATED NEVER EVEN FINISHED WON IN HIZ LIF. ART WAZ VERE SORE BUT HE SED HE WOD NEVER DO TOO MAKE JUST AZ WONDON WANTED HIM TOO. WHEN HE ARRIVED TOO BE A SISTER TOO HIM, BUT HE POINTED OUT THAT HE ALREDE HATED SEVEN-TEN SISTERZ.

SO HE WENT BAK TOO ETIG ARTD SLEPIG ARTD SWIMIG IN HIS STREME ARTD PLAIG SPIDER-IN-THE PANTS WITH HIS GIRLZ.

HIS FINNL MARRED ANOTHER WON DA ART HIZ LATE (WAR. HE NEVER KNOD GOT AWA FROM WORK FOR NOR WHEN ARTN (WAR ART A TIM. HIS HATED SEVEN CHILDREN ARTD ANOTHER WANTED SO BAD SOMETHIG WHEN THAT HE WANTED HIZ TERM EXTD TOO THE GOM LIN. HIZ BELOW BRAK DOWN BEFOR LONG ARTD HE DID WITHOUT OVER HAVING HATED A VACATION IN HIZ LIF.

HIS YOUNG NEVER CONTINUED TOO ET ARTD SLEP ARTD SWIM IN THE STREME ARTD PLA GAME WITH THE GIRLZ. HE NEVER GOT ANYWHERE, BUT HE HATED A LONG LIF ARTD A WONDERFUL TIM.

THE END IT IZ NOT TOO HAVE LOVED ARTD LOST THAN NEVER TOO HAVE LOVED ART AL.

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All this while, Lennie was strengthening his eye muscles to focus at the near point and to move his eyes automatically from left to right across the printed page. This left-to-right direction, contrary to the "whole word" theory, linguistic scholars now report to be the way we all must process words when we read.

But it was when Lennie began to process words syllable by syllable, from left to right, that he began to read the pages that previously he had been scanning to find examples. He began to recognize certain letter groups repeated in words and that they all contained a vowel sound:

1 + 1
RAIN ING = 2 vowel sounds and 2 syllables

After that Lennie noticed that certain syllables repeated in different words. He had found roots and affixes. He would use them to find meaning in new words:

<MIS->

MIS take MIS understood

I remember the night Lennie brought to our attention the word

(2)
INTE LIGENCE
(R)
between choose

What, he asked, had "choose" to do with "intelligence?"

A long silence followed his question as we began to realize that intelligence involved making choices.

We soon found that words alone, fascinating as we had found the surprises buried in their roots in words like

WEIRD TANTALIZE,

would not by themselves make us competent readers.

So we looked for meaning in word groups, realizing it took, for example, eight words in this statement to identify the person who left the room:

The young blonde girl in the red sweater left the room.

Lennie, like all native speakers of English, knew the subject-predicate relationship and the importance of word order in English when he entered the class. Nevertheless, he would need a blueprint to find the intentions of a message with complicated constructions.

So he learned to analyze statements in their natural word order (subject-predicate) by using Prof. Robert Allen's plan:

FRONT)		TRUNK	(END
when)	subject	predicate	(when
where)			(where
how)			(how
why)			(why
...			...
Yesterday)	students	studied	(in the library

As before, they underlined in discarded magazines selected passages beginning with a capital letter and ending with a period. They copied them for blueprinting and presented them for inspection.

Now Lennie was ready to take on paragraphs, easily recognized on the printed page by the indentations at the beginning of each one. As before, he selected paragraphs from articles in discarded magazines.

Now he could put to further use those abilities he would need in order to read English discourse.

LISTENING OBSERVING ORGANIZING SOLVING PROBLEMS

EVALUATING CONCLUDING

After "listening" to the message in his chosen paragraph, he "observed" that the topic would fall under certain general classifications. The paragraph would generally be about a

person place event idea

just as the pictures he had been "reading" could be classified.

Hidden messages, like basic assumptions, unwritten attitudes of a writer toward his topic and his readers escaped Lennie. It would be sometime later, if ever, he would easily evaluate the accuracy or appropriateness of an article. He did not offer his conclusions about the stories we read together. It was enough now that he could recognize the obvious.

Lennie's first writing assignment had been a "place" paragraph. He was asked to write a description of an imaginary island of his own. Like the others, he was given a schedule for its completion.

Week	Assignment
1.	Imagine an island of your own. Draw a rough sketch of its shape.
2.	Select five (5) items and mark their positions on the island and a spot (x) from which they could all be seen.
3.	Write a paragraph describing your island as sketched for the class to read.
4.	Edit your paragraph. Check for errors in spelling. Replace vague words for specific ones. ~ ~ REWRITE IT.
5.	Read your paragraph to the class for whom it had been written.

After writing paragraphs of their own, they could expect writers to state their topic clearly, economically, vividly, develop it logically, and bring it to a plausible conclusion.

Lennie's paragraph, like the others, began with the statement

My island is a special place.

Handwritten, complete with margins and indentation, with only an occasional misspelled word, complete sentences, his paragraph reflected his new abilities to think and to communicate. It was evidence of his growing respect for himself and others. Sadly, it also revealed past culture deprivation, for his imaginary island, in sharp contrast to the fantasies of the others, held only a lonely road, a car, a small tree, a sun, and a few clouds.

~ ~ ~

Lennie listened when we discussed events in history that had shaped the words we use today.

He listened when we imagined ourselves with Harold in the Battle of Hastings fighting to defeat the Normans from across the Channel and to keep their French language out of England.

We imagine ourselves in one of King Alfred's compulsory classes for his nobles and their sons. We saw English becoming a language to be respected abroad, a language now heard around the world.

After only ten weeks we were reading famous short stories aloud. Lennie surprised us all when one evening he took his turn reading!

One topic about different kinds of ideas about JUSTICE we found in stories like Stockton's "Lady or The Tiger?", Broun's "The Fifty-first Dragon," Jackson's "The Lottery." The last time I saw Lennie he was reading Jules Verne's "20,000 Leagues Under The Sea."

~ ~ ~

I remember now exploring with them the world of words, talking about talk, feeling the pulse of English rhythms, enjoying metaphors and parables. We found that the English language, with all its defects, to be a living, vibrant thing. We experienced its power to shape the future. We saw its limitations, too, as an instrument capable of carrying our messages. We learned to respect the different sounds of different regions and the people who spoke them.

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From that first evening when Lennie shared with us his ambition to learn to read, his cell mates, involved in uncovering the wily ways of words in their lives, took it upon themselves to see that he would accomplish his goal. For a time, then, Lennie was the center of our little world.

His mentors would often withhold their own answers to challenges we presented to give Lennie time to understand the question.

They would reword our explanations and instructions for him to understand.

They adapted our proposed assignments to his capabilities as they saw them.

They acknowledged his successes with words of encouragement.

Lennie blossomed under their attention. Their understanding, patience and encouragement were models for us all to emulate.

Only once did a cloud disturb this benevolent atmosphere. I wish now that I had ignored it.

We had just finished distributing folders to hold their assignments. They had been provided by my church circle, whose interest in our work sustained ours. Lennie happened to have received one of the more attractive folders ~ heavier, with inside pockets, and in color. His neighbor at the table had not been as fortunate. He suggested to Lennie that perhaps he would like to exchange folders. Predictably, Lennie happily agreed.

But I was not so easily conned.

I asked Lennie, "Do you really want to exchange folders?". Obviously confused by my question, Lennie considered his answer for a long moment. Then he mumbled that he probably had not wanted to make the exchange. Under my innocent, but steady, eyes, the "friend" returned the folder.

But Lennie that night had exchanged more than a folder: his innocence for a suspicion that the world may not be as simple as he had assumed, as benevolent as he had supposed.

Such a cold world, of course, is not limited to prisons. Examples of its indifference to the serious problems of illiteracy, even by those whose responsibility it is to provide solutions, continue to challenge my own innocence to this day.

Such a challenge occurred years ago at a dinner where I found myself seated next to the Director of Lennie's school ~ Lincoln Intermediate #12. Assuming that he would be interested in Lennie's achievements, I shared with him his success story. His short indifferent response was not exactly what I had expected.

"There will always be some who fall through the cracks."

Yet for those discarded ones, the chaff scattered on the wind, the debris attached to the gold, I weep. For to be denied entrance into the world of words, to be limited to one's own thoughts, never permitted to share the adventures of others is, to me, a tragedy of considerable dimensions.

Not all were so callous. I was told after Lennie's first absence from class that his prison inmates had threatened to riot, bringing with it that riot's publicity, should Lennie be placed in solitary confinement the first night after his conviction. That night regulations were suspended. Lennie had not been alone through what must have been the darkest of nights.

But, for now, I remember Lennie.

POSTSCRIPT

Newspaper reporters described Lennie for their readers as they saw him standing before the Judge awaiting arraignment just before he had walked into our class that first night:

"He stood alone, head bowed, poorly dressed, an illiterate, unable to read, write, or compute, with a mentality far below average."

Newspaper reporters described Lennie months later as he stood once more before the bench beside his defense attorney to hear the sentence imposed by a jury of his peers:

"A good looking young man, well groomed, alert, but calm, said to be slightly retarded."

They commented further on his dignity after the State had pronounced his sentence.

But, after all, had not Lennie survived the darker dungeon of illiteracy in his time?

FRED ~ {Yes, But ... }

~ ~ ~

He would not have liked his obituary. In fact, Fred would have rewritten it had he been able.

For Fred, when I knew him in our prison classes, seldom agreed with our conclusions about how words worked in the English language. He would always find exceptions to the patterns uncovered by the young men who had accepted our invitation to explore the wily ways of words during the temporary interruption of their life style. {Originally, I had included the word 'winsome' in the title of my program, "*An Open Invitation to Explore the Wily Ways of Words*". I omitted it when a sixth-grade critic observed that the title was too long.} I regret that decision. My seduction by their charms is what had put me in prison in the first place. A Superior Court Judge, who had wanted a more even playing field for those he had sentenced, unlocked prison doors and had kept them open to me and my partner-in-crime.

This emaciated, older man, often in and out of prison during our own time there, never failed to show up in class in spite of his constant corrections of our findings.

Annoyed one evening at his remarks, I asked him after class why he bothered to attend when he so obviously disapproved of our methods. He replied by asking me to consider his alternative:- those two hours alone in an eight-by-ten cement cell wondering what misinformation we were dispensing upstairs without him.

In retrospect, Fred's contributions to the class were more spice than bitters in our menu.

I remember that time when, after considerable examination, we had concluded that every syllable in a word contained a vowel and its sound. {syl-la-ble - three vowels and three vowel sounds}, useful information for attacking an unfamiliar written word. From his seat opposite me at the table, Fred muttered the word 'microcosm' with its four sounds and three vowels. This time I was prepared for his objection. I topped his word with 'prism' and 'film.' We then had further grounds for our conclusion that the English language could not be trusted to obey its own rules. It was indeed the 'wily' culprit we were investigating.

No matter where we looked for a place on the globe, Fred would find it first. Not only would he find it, but he would have been there. As an Army brat, he may have visited or even lived in many places around the world.

For example, if while reading around the table Frank Stockton's "*The Lady or The Tiger,*" Fred would announce that he had been inside that Roman amphitheater. Or, when sharing the wrath of the sea with Stephen Crane in "*The Open Boat.*" we would learn that Fred had been in even worse storms. He took delight in revealing the climax of an O'Henry short story before the author could do it for us. Fred had been the only one to identify the voyager from the other side of the moon in Sambrow's short-short story. And Fred had known more beautiful women than the one who had had no luck in D. H. Lawrence's "*The Rocking Horse Winner.*"

To this day, I am not sure that Fred, the engineer who according to him had invented everything but the wheel, was as well read, and as well traveled as he would have had us believe. For he never allowed us a glimpse of the real Fred - except once.

A week after our failure to appear at the prison because of icy road conditions for our usual Monday night class, Fred allowed me a glimpse of the real man behind the mask. Exiting behind the others, he told me that for the first time in his life he realized how his wife and children must have felt when he failed to arrive home as expected. To this day I resent the fact that our absence that stormy night had not been announced as I had requested in advance.

Today I am no longer annoyed with Fred - even as I recall his upstaging me with his poetry. I had written for the class an "*Alphabetiary*". * In it I had tried to put myself to sleep by repeating the alphabet instead of counting sheep. From the "*Scarlet A*" to the "*Snoozing Z*" I had paraded them across my field of dreams. Rather clever of me, I had thought, until Fred read his poem on the same subject.

* Available on request

PHO-NIK-2R-IK *

When in my mind I seem to keep,
Events that will not let me sleep,
I help the sandman for awhile
And count the alphabet ~ not sheep.

A-B-C-D in marching file,
So tall and proud, they make me smile.
E-F-G-H look crisp and new
And smartly step in soldier style.

They all pass by for my review.
S-T-U-V and Double U.
Last come X and Y, then Z appears,
Salutes, then bids me adieu.

Their final message fills my ears.
A proclamation, mixed with tears.
"Through them man has these many years
Expressed his hopes, his dreams, his fears."

Fred
4/6/87

* Pho-nik-2r-ik = Phonics plus rhetoric

Wherever Fred may be tonight, I am certain that, if on high, he is informing St. Peter, or even his Superior, how He might have improved His creation.

Or if, Heaven forbid, Fred is in the presence of his Satanic majesty, I am equally sure he is making suggestions on how to improve the environment.

AN ARTIST IN DISGUISE?

~ ~ ~ ~

And then there was Conrad.

Goodlooking, eager to please, polite, not yet twenty-one, Conrad was every mother's answer to her prayers for a boyfriend for her daughter. Had there been apples available to him, we would have been presented with a polished one at every session - after he had pulled back chairs for us to be seated.

It was he who poured the coffee, cleaned the table afterward, and closed the door. When Conrad was on kitchen duty, appliances shone; on hall duty, every corner dust free.

Everyone liked Conrad - his teachers, the guards, and, as far as we could tell, his fellow cell mates. He adapted well, even to the too-often familiar amenities of life in prison.

It was probably from Conrad that came the words

"Now I lay me down to sleep,"

followed by another's

"If I die before I wake,"

and joined in chorus by the rest of us

"I pray the Lord my soul to take."

This childhood prayer we shared was prompted by our discussion of when to use 'lie' or 'lay'. We had concluded that all we need know was how to conjugate the two and check the presence or absence of an object.

lie (0) - lay (0) - lain (0) (Lie down)
lay (-) - laid (-) - laid (-) (Lay the book on the table)

Conrad never failed to do his homework. Although his contributions were not brilliant, they served their purposes - except for his superiority at "reading" pictures for he often saw hidden messages in the details of a reproduction of a Rockwell painting, for example, ones the rest of us had missed. He lingered long over the Rockwell picture of a happy college football player and the beautiful coeds hanging on his arms while in the background a less physically endowed classmate had only books in his arms and a mournful look on his face beneath dark-rimmed glasses.

He was first to note the irony in another Rockwell reproduction: the contrast between the sign at the entrance to a village

WESTON
THE FRIENDLY TOWN
Population: 573

and the policeman beyond it writing out a traffic ticket to a disillusioned driver.

Although we never accepted personal life stories, never knew why our students were sent to prison (except those we read in the local paper), Conrad's story was to be an exception.

His tale began when, one morning, a customer at the music store where my 'partner in crime,' Arlene, worked (when she too was not in prison) came in with a guitar case to be repaired. For some reason the customer seemed familiar to Arlene although she was sure she had never seen her before. When she opened the case, she discovered why. A small plaque inside the case carried Conrad's last name.

As Arlene worked to repair the minor flaw, she felt the woman's distress and offered quiet sympathy. She told Arlene then of the depression she felt after her son had refused to see her in prison - even though she understood the cause of his rejection. For she had abandoned her twin boys to her mother for a vocation in Nashville, Tennessee. One son was in prison here; the other, in a prison on the West Coast.

What happened then, if anything, between Conrad and Arlene I never knew. But mother and son did subsequently meet in prison.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Our shock at the answer to our question about the reason for Conrad's absence from class, his first ever, was met with both sympathy and amusement.

It seems that after work release to a printing company north of the prison, instead of returning to prison, he continued to walk past it to a diner near the center of Gettysburg. Here at the counter he "conned" the man seated next to him into driving him to see his girl friend who, he said, was expecting him - his car being repaired. Not surprisingly, (ourselves having known Conrad) his new-found friend obliged.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

To this day I think it was rather mean-spirited of the sheriff to wait to pick him up until he had crossed the border into Maryland where his escape would have more serious consequences.

But then wasn't it generous of Conrad to confide his escape plans to his cell mate ~ who revealed them to the warden ~ who passed the news on to the sheriff?

Our distress at Conrad's betrayal of our trust and our own naivete did not go unnoticed. The warden invited us into his office to offer condolences. He confessed that he too had been a victim to his charm.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Would that Conrad had been the only student to have conned us! But we were to be victims of another scam artist ~ Jose. This time my reaction was anger, not disappointment.

Jose was Mexican by birth, we supposed. He neither spoke nor understood English ~ in our classes. In court he always had a translator, well-paid by the County, at his side. In class we were on our own.

I did my best to communicate. But even my best had its limitations, for I was never renowned for my success on the stage. In high school operettas, I was a disaster. In college, I always failed at the try-outs. But, in prison, I gave it my very best.

In acting out words like "write" and "hear", Aesop's Fables like the contest between the sun and the wind, I was more or less successful. "Fight" and "surrender" were words that challenged my creativity along with my dignity. Could witnessing my dramatics have prompted Arlene to study Spanish later?

Sometimes Jose understood our first "translations" but too often he remained puzzled in spite of my repeated pantomiming.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

In retrospect, we should have at least been somewhat suspicious long before he confided his secret to me after he was sentenced. He had whispered on his way out of the room to the safety of his cell that he had been born in Texas and spoke English better than Spanish.

This time it had been I who asked to speak to the warden. Indignant that my tax money had been so fraudulently spent, I had not waited for an invitation. The warden looked up from behind his desk to respond to my indignation and said, "We suspected the possibility."

Today I am even more indignant. When my editor suggested the real possibility that others in the class may have known his secret all along and may have been enjoying my performance in silent hilarity, I again felt betrayed.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Fortunately, the only other Mexican experience during those nearly seven years behind bars was a pleasant one.

An older Mexican, studying hard with us to master the English language, did not need my histrionics. One evening he managed to express in broken English his gratitude for the dictionary given him, courtesy of the Pennsylvania Department of Adult Basic Education through a 1989 grant. Realizing the necessity for a dictionary while studying English, he earnestly begged me to send one of them to his daughter in school in Mexico. It had not been easy for him to humble himself in this manner, but his need was, obviously, greater than his pride.

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It so happened that at the time he had been in our class, I had attended a conference of churches devoted to the needs of migrants working in the orchards of Adams County.

After listening to a lengthy appeal by a Mexican preacher for more money for his mission, I approached him to tell him that one of his compatriots in the Adams County Prison would appreciate a visit from him.

His response was a surprise, especially after having heard his emotional appeal earlier. Again it was evidence of my innocence when it came to the lack of concern of the public for the illiterate.

"We have nothing to do with that kind of trash," he replied.

So much for Matthew 18:12 and 25:36.

STEVE

~ - ~

"A mind is a terrible thing to waste."

Steve, a long time member of our prison class, proposed this familiar reminder as a trade mark for our endeavors.

Like this suggestion, his interests went far beyond our narrow confines. He would write for, and receive, free samples of colorful spelling programs, subscriptions to magazines offered free to prisons. He wrote to travel agents for free posters of faraway places to provide visual stimulation in an otherwise drab environment. He entered writing contests.

A favorite entry of his was a story he told about himself.

On work release to a large factory in a neighboring village, he had attracted the eye of a fellow employee of the opposite sex. She would often invite him to dinner with her family, enticing him with descriptions of her mother's cooking.

Desperate to find an excuse for his refusals without revealing his current address, he had carefully prepared one which was truthful, but somewhat evasive.

"I am truly sorry that I can not accept your invitation. I am committed elsewhere for some time and so I am not free to accept your kindness."

Long after Steve had left us, I found myself at another State Prison Administrators' meeting seated next to a warden from an institution near Steve's home town. I asked him, more to make conversation than to receive information, whether or not he had ever known a Steve ____. He immediately recognized the name. He had not only heard of him, but was well acquainted with him. He had been a frequent resident in his "condominium." In fact, Steve was at that very moment enjoying the benefits of its accommodations.

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Now I understood Steve's efforts to improve the environment at our small institution. He had known better places.

But I doubt that even Steve would have approved the tactics of the inmates to improve their accommodations at another institution that day. I heard about the Camp Hill riots on the car radio on my way home from that meeting. The riots, begun a half hour after we had left, explained, to me at least, the unusual, ominous silence of the inmates serving us from behind the narrow counter that separated us.

~ ~ ~

Remembering Steve today, Arlene and I agree that he had "brightened the corner" where he was when we knew him.

"BUT TOMORROW NEVER COMES"

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

If we had been asked to name our favorite "criminal" who had willingly entered this jungle of a language as tangled as any south of our border, we might have chosen Sol.

His practical, calm acceptance of the world as he found it, childlike as it was, I envied. For I never could accept such a world. I am never satisfied with the way things are. My husband once threatened to glue the furniture to the floor to keep me from another rearrangement.

Even the prison environment met with Sol's approval. He would have found the English language also equal to its task had his equanimity not been overcome by his curiosity. Then, too, he may have been a little bored with the perpetual card game and/or the wild chases in pursuit of villains on television, the only two diversions offered in the dimly-lit court surrounded by its cages. At any rate, Sol decided to sample the only other option ~ our English classes. Of a disposition that accepted what he saw, he found our classes an improvement. He became a contributing member of our society.

Sol was an only child of a career army officer, like Fred. Sol's parents had not allowed prison bars to separate them from their son. They exchanged letters almost daily, letters he sometimes shared with us.

Only once, to our recollection, did Sol step out of character and try to change a situation in which he had found himself. Alone in a small anteroom of the local hospital, with an attractive nurse preparing him for examination, he felt he was not receiving the attention due him. The guard in the room outside, to save Sol any possible embarrassment, had changed into civilian attire before leaving the prison. His consideration for Sol went unappreciated when Sol asked the nurse if she knew who the gentleman was who had come in with him. She shook her head indifferently ... until he told her that the man with him was a prison guard. Her reaction to being alone with a 'dangerous criminal' more than satisfied his need for attention ~ if we could believe Sol's obvious enjoyment of the incident while telling us the story.

Another revelation of Sol's serenity in a troubled world was revealed in the paragraph he wrote to show how paragraphs worked in English discourse. After writing paragraphs to illustrate a "place," a "person," and an "event," he read us an "idea" paragraph he had written, entitled, "Alone in an 8 x 10-Foot Cell." His feelings, expressed so mournfully, exaggerated as they were, moved Arlene to reach out to comfort him. But Sol hastened to reassure her. He had written the sentence at the end, "But tomorrow never comes," because he remembered Mrs. Murray had once pointed out that writers often, for effect, ended their stories with a short sentence. "And that sentence was the only short one I could think of," he confessed.

Further evidence of his coolness in a troubled world presented itself during the December-January holidays. He had written at this time an "event" paragraph about a celebration. Mainly out of curiosity, Arlene asked him why he had not written about a Jewish event, one with which he was familiar. Expecting an evasion or some complicated reason why he had not chosen such an event, he explained simply that he would have written about his Jewish celebrations but he did not know how to spell their words.

In the letter Sol shared with me from his mother I would not have changed a single word. In it she expressed her bewilderment about the change in her son's letter to her.

"Where were all those misspelled words? Those incomplete sentences she had become accustomed to?" she asked. "Why," she wrote, "your letters even have paragraphs!"

~ ~ ~

Not all inmates we knew accepted the world offered them as Sol had accepted his.

One, we were told, refused the two months' reduction of sentence offered in exchange for attending our classes for ten weeks. So great was his anger at a system that had labeled him unworthy of contact with the heritage that belongs to all Americans that he chose to serve out his term. When he was fourteen, he had been segregated from his friends and placed in classes considered more appropriate to his "kind". He chose eight weeks in prison rather than submit himself to a situation where again he might be found inadequate. After all, had he not long ago been sentenced by a system to a lifetime of exclusion from one segment of our society?

This same rage I saw in another of our students. Like Sol's parents they too loved their son. When they were made aware of the possibility of early release, they demanded that their son attend these classes. He was infuriated at their orders.

The anger melted away gradually during his first session ~ until near the end of the hour, he was offering his own examples (or exceptions) to illustrate a proposition about English along with the others. The winsome, wily ways of words had worked their magic once again.

Ten weeks later, almost to the day, this formerly reluctant student took the GED test given in prison, together with others eligible to take it. He, like the others tested that day, easily passed and he, too, left prison later with a high school diploma.

True, there are a few among us, especially present-day high school teachers I have known, who have little respect for this substitute degree. But I am not among the few. I agree, together with a former Pennsylvania Secretary of Education speaking at a Prison Administrators' meeting, where I too had been invited to speak, who said many high school graduates he knew could not pass the GED test. This test demands proof of knowledge of letter patterns in English words, of significant parts within them, of sentence structures and accepted usages. Above all, it requires proof of an ability to find meaning in English discourse. I know recent graduates who have not a clue as to how words really work. My respect for those who carry the GED diploma has no limits.

In contrast to that refusal to attend our classes in spite of the carrot offered was Bill's desire to continue.

His term was over before the next GED test was rescheduled. He asked, and was granted, permission to return for the next few classes. But when he reported for class, he was refused entrance. In a letter addressed to me, c/o of the prison, he explained his absence and his disappointment. "Your classes," he added, "saved my sanity."

From information months later from an outside source, I understood his comment. He had been caught when more influential transgressors had escaped a sting operation. The reason for this, his first and only involvement in an activity outside the law, was to find money to keep his family from eviction from the house they had labored so long and hard to improve.

I have had no other information about our former students ... except once. This time we actually met ~ in a line of guests at an affair celebrating the Adams County Library's publication of my book, "A Library for Adams County." The young man who shook my hand had spent two years in our classes where he had often introduced material new to the class but familiar to him.

To his wife behind him, I whispered, "Your husband probably knows me better than most of the people here tonight."

~ ~ ~

I tried to keep my emotions under control but Arlene likes to remember the times I would lose what cool I usually had. It happened every time someone introduced a "rhyme" he had heard in grade school.

The rhyme (I hate to bring it now to life again) did a lot more to confuse than enlighten ~

When two vowels go walking,
the first one does the talking.

In the first place it is more often false than true as in

field eight they . . .

In the second place, it destroys the concept of the digraph (two+ vowels representing one speech sound).

Ē
f ie ld = 1 syllable

One elementary school teacher, taken to task for promulgating a falsehood detrimental to learning to read, told me she was aware of the error but thought the couplet "cute."

~ ~ ~

I am still trying, unsuccessfully, to emulate Sol's acceptance of the world he finds. While I no longer expect change in a so-called "failed" education system, I still find it hard to understand and accept the indifference I find to possible changes. The general public, especially those

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parents of children who are making the grade, often unaware of being short-changed, does not really want change, it seems. The media do not accept suggested solutions for publication, especially should they be "different." Our elected officials, except for photo opportunities to "show off" their interest in the education of our children, simply forward suggestions to the bureaucracy they created but over which one of our representatives recently admitted in public he has no control. Another wrote me of his failure to move it to action.

But until our world improves, I shall most likely continue to lose my cool.

PART II

TO

The Reverend Robert MacAskill
Pastor Emeritus,
Gettysburg First Presbyterian Church,

who opened church doors
to me and my first student

MY SINCERE THANKS

THE VIETNAMESE CONNECTION

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Mr. De's presence there in front of the fireplace in our Gettysburg home that bright New Year's Day of 1973 might have been the setting for a good novel - except that Mr. De was real. To the young Vietnamese naval officer warming himself before his first "fire inside," the scenario must have seemed even more fictitious.

For only three weeks earlier he had been standing on the deck of his ship in the Mekong Delta watching the hasty retreat of his country's allies and facing the reality of death at the hands of their enemies in the next inevitable scene.

Conversation that day was minimal. Mr. De spoke very little English. For all that, the dignity of his silence commanded our respect and that of our other two guests. Even as he ate our strange Pennsylvania Dutch New Year's pork and sauerkraut, he must have been hearing the clang of the steel hook from the United States battleship as it struck their deck and the rattle of the chain that had yanked them forward out of reach of their enemy. In its hasty retreat from a lost war, the huge ship had rescued Mr. De and his shipmates from certain death.

Reports of the ignominious retreat from an ill-advised venture had been hard for us at the table to believe. But the facts had been confirmed by a friend who had lived in Saigon for years as a United States agricultural agent. They had recently been in contact with Vietnamese friends who had been witness to the debacle.

After a brief stop in Honolulu, another in Philadelphia, he, along with three other shipmates, had found temporary harbor in Gettysburg. Here the Presbyterian Church had accepted responsibility for their induction into the United States.

The church had taken its commitment seriously. One member provided an apartment above her own for the newcomers. Others made them guests at their table in their own homes. Menial jobs were found for officers from a land whose civilization was older than ours. Rev. Robert MacAskill asked me to introduce one of them to the English language.

I shall never forget his confidence in me and his genuine interest in our efforts. He always managed to stop by at some point. We felt we were not alone.

Nor shall I ever forget Mr. De. Never in my twenty-plus years of teaching had I encountered so brilliant an intellect. And he had been as eager to learn as I to teach.

From the start Mr. De understood the strategies of our attack on the English language. We began with a simple sound code in which the thirty-seven significant speech sounds in my own version of English had its own symbol. We first heard and saw the five long vowel sounds: A - E - I - O - U. They alone shared the same sound as their name and were easy to hear and to say. /I/ as <I> was easy; /U/ as <you> was harder. Mr. De adopted the code overnight. He could now "see" the words whose sounds he had heard around him. For a time he ignored the real spellings of the words that always accompanied the coded ones. But before long he began using the standard spellings of the written words. He needed little help in organizing words under rubrics of their own. By the time we had reached lessons on the syllable and how to divide words according to certain rules, his vocabulary had reached numbers far greater than the vocabularies of the young people he worked with behind the counters of McDonald's. They seldom spoke to him personally but Mr. De now understood most of everything they said.

Soon Mr. De was grouping words into units, even before I introduced Dr. Allen's blueprint for an English statement in its natural word order. He would later tell me that the code and the blueprint saved him weeks of discovering how English words worked. I never doubted that he would have eventually found how they functioned on his own.

It was about this time that a friend of ours, one of many who may have tired of my frequent reports of Mr. De's success, explained to me from her own experience with the Vietnamese, that it was customary for them to pretend to understand when in reality they did not have a clue. She, from her experience as a high school counselor, explained that Mr. De was not the genius I saw but only a polite young Vietnamese.

Shaken by this revelation but determined to prove her wrong, I took with me one evening an old standardized math test from sixth grade to third year in college. That night we matched answers to the reading problems. (Unfortunately, I had not brought with me the answer sheet.) We sailed along together through grade school and two years of high school. By the middle of high school my confirmation of his answers began to falter. They failed altogether by the time we entered college while Mr. De went on solving problems. So much for Vietnamese courtesy!

One evening I arrived at our church meeting room before Mr. De. I was there then before he burst into the room, breathless from running. He had just had a telephone call from his uncle in Iowa. His application to the university there had been accepted and he must leave at once to begin the new semester!

Our church gathered the next evening to say goodbye. He stood to address the members - in English - to thank them for their hospitality and friendship.

I never saw Mr. De Again.

For several years he wrote to us - long letters about his classes at the University of Iowa. He had been enrolled in classes for foreigners for only three weeks before he was transferred to regular classes. Mr. De graduated in three years, not the usual four, with a degree in engineering. Before he could return to Gettysburg to thank us again, the government sent him to Silicon Valley to work for them.

For the next few years, especially at Christmas, letters from Mr. De included pictures of his wedding to a lovely Vietnamese girl, to be followed with pictures of his children. His last letter to me reported the new business in the computer industry that he and his wife had begun.

I hope today that Mr. De would no longer react as he did when I presented him for "reading" a Rockwell reproduction of the "Four Freedoms". After one glance, he gently pushed it back across the table with these words, "I no longer believe the promises of any nation."

Only four more opportunities to help emigres from Vietnam came my way.

The first of these, I must confess, I solicited. The teenager seated opposite me at a table in the Adams County Library seemed so lonely. When I offered to help him with his English, he accepted at once. The librarian reserved us space for our weekly exploration of the English language.

One afternoon my willing prey seemed so unhappy that I feared he had received bad news from Vietnam. Reluctantly, he told me that his English teacher had ridiculed him in class because he had answered, incorrectly, her question about the origin of English. When no one else had responded to her question, he came to her rescue with the answer he had found in my informal account of its beginnings. His teacher dismissed his answer with disdain, "Everyone knows English comes from Latin." With that, what little acceptance he had managed to attain from a few of his classmates seeped away. He was now confused as well as disheartened.

Quietly, I reached out to touch his arm and guided him to an unabridged dictionary nearby. Turning to the introduction beginning with an account of the origins of English, I guided his eyes along the lines that confirmed what he had learned from my stories. The tree of languages showed English on line with Germanic and Latin on another labeled Italic. He now stood up straighter, revived like a flower after rain.

I advised him then not to correct his teacher, either in class or in private. It must be enough for him to know he had been right.

However, I was not so noble. I wrote the superintendent of schools about this piece of misinformation delivered by this teacher in his school. He never replied. Perhaps he, too, thinks English stems from Latin..

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My second opportunity was by invitation this time. It came from the parents of a young soldier in Vietnam who had married a beautiful Vietnamese girl. He had sent her home to live with his parents in Gettysburg until he returned.

Learning English was not the bride's first concern. She was homesick, not only for her family in adverse conditions, but she longed to be with her husband.

Her indifference to the English language continued until the day I introduced my code ~ one sound ~ one symbol. Now the English language made sense! Not only that, but it solved her communication problem with her husband in Vietnam without going through his parents. She sent him the key along with the first letter she had written in code. She continued to write him freely about her love for him and her concern for his safety. How army censors dealt with this secret code I never learned ... leniently, I presume, for the letters continued.

~ ~ ~ ~

My third Vietnamese involvement was by invitation also. Friends of ours had taken into their home the son of a Vietnamese business man they had known when the husband had been stationed in Saigon as a U. S. agricultural consultant. They were only too happy to turn over the responsibility to help him succeed in high school. Outgoing, fun-loving, he had no problem making friends with his classmates. I understood why when I met his parents when they too came to the United States. After their son graduated from high school, he went on to earn two master's degrees after college. He joined the family business until he started one of his own. I'm sure, as a father in the United States, he now understands the role of children here better than he once did.

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The fourth experience too revealed a clash of cultures. The husband of the couple who came to me for help asked for separate lessons. He admitted he was unable to deal with a situation in which a wife excelled her husband.

Cultures clashed again when they told me of their plans to go to California to be with relatives. Their plans did not include informing their employers. We advised them that it was customary here to give at least two weeks' notice first. Their worst fears were confirmed when they were not paid for their last two weeks. The loss meant that they could not stay in motels, or eat in restaurants while traveling west. Over their objections, to compensate for the loss our advice had brought them, we paid them the equivalent due them.

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History repeats itself. Now Bosnians are the Vietnamese of yesterday. How they learn English I do not know.

MIXED MESSAGES

A telephone call one morning in April from Cassie Nutter, then working with mothers-on-welfare social services, connected me eventually with eight of her clients.

She had proposed that I work with these young mothers for ten weeks to help them hone their word skills, enabling them to be eligible to attend classes preparing for the GED exam.

So it was with high hopes that we began classes to explore together how to make words work to their advantage. We met for the first time at the door to a room Cassie had reserved for us in the same building that housed other classes ... only to find that door locked and no key available to us.

Concealing her disappointment, Cassie turned to us with a cheerful invitation to follow her down the avenue to York Street and the St. James Lutheran Church. She assured us that we would be welcome there.

We entered the open doors of the church and followed Cassie into the church library with its reference books, dictionary, atlas, and encyclopedia within arms' reach. We were about to enjoy the benefits and concern for the community for which the church was famous.

We began our work together with the usual approach ~ a discussion about the English language. We talked about the challenge it presented. Centuries old, but, like all living things, it keeps changing over the years, even in our own lifetime. Compared to spoken language, the art of writing words had emerged only about six thousand years ago. Even to linguistics scholars, it presents problems. Our own mistakes would be inevitable, nothing to be embarrassed about, nothing to diminish our self-esteem. To this day, I believe Cassie deliberately misspelled a word in the pre-test I gave that day to illustrate this attitude. At any rate, she demonstrated the proper way to deal with one's mistakes.

Cassie was there with us for most of the ten sessions. She contributed words to prove or disprove propositions presented about the English language. She counted syllables in the words she had selected from discarded magazines, sometimes assisted by divisions printers made at the end of lines. She looked for hidden messages in roots and affixes. She blueprinted statements. And she "read" pictures, applying the same six abilities required to read.

Their "reading" of the bird picture startled me, one of many surprises this venture into English has brought. They studied the picture of the two red birds perched on branches, one below the other, mouths open. But these mothers saw, not two birds disputing over territory or simply exchanging the day's gossip, but a hungry fledgling expecting food from a father bird.

I could only conclude that if pictures could send such different messages to viewers, even contradictory ones, how much more confusing must be written messages. The words "mixed messages" took on a whole new meaning to me.

Soon after we had been welcomed to the unlocked room at St. James Lutheran Church on York Street, I remarked to my own Presbyterian pastor, Rev. Dan Hans, that I wished I could be as confident of the same reception of the group by my own church as Cassie had been of hers.

Without a moment's hesitation, Rev. Hans replied that I could indeed be as sure of the same welcome on High and Baltimore as the one we had found on York Street.

I took immediate advantage of his assurance and met at the Presbyterian Church shortly afterward with one of the mothers to make up lessons she had missed at St. James.

~ ~ ~

Cassie was among those present at the GED graduation ceremony for all who had passed the test. Among those receiving diplomas were seven of our eight students. They had not only passed that preliminary test but had passed the real one.

The eighth member? She had taken our advice and had returned to school to take the one course she needed and graduated from Gettysburg High School.

Invited by Cassie to the ceremony, I was there to receive expressions of gratitude from our students at the reception afterward. I was also recipient of words less kind from those sponsoring the event ~ not all of whose students had been among those receiving diplomas that evening.

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WHAT'S WITH THE BUFFALO?

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You know how it is - letting your hair down while having your hair done.

A beauty salon is the perfect place to satisfy your need to unload the frustration of the day - complete with captive audience. First of all, you have put yourself in the hands of a professional attempting to make you look good. So relaxed are you that those frustrations, ordinarily buried deep in the underworld of your mind, rise to the occasion and overflow. And you, like me, then probably share the latest episode in your flow of frustrations.

In my case, the frustration to be shared was my latest defeat in efforts to reach those in our community in need of improved language skills in order for them to fill jobs that required such skills. A State Senator, who for a year had been trying to help me and my program see daylight, finally admitted he could not interest those whose job it was to find solutions to the education problem that the media had been reporting for years. The Senator had been my last hope.

He had tried. He had invited the Chief of Adult Basic Education to his office to introduce her to me and my program. In his presence at that time, more than a year before his admission of defeat, Chief Kennan had pronounced my program 'worthwhile.' When I spoke of my previous attempts to get the attention of others, she remarked with some amusement that those letters had ended up in my rather bulky file in her office. There, apparently, they had been laid to rest. (Privately, I still mourn the interment of my letter to Governor Ridge that began: "Do you know where your eleventh graders are tonight - 'literally'? If, perchance, you care about their whereabouts, please look at the enclosed samples of their ability to write a paragraph. You would probably agree with me that third graders might do as well.")

The Senator tried again. This time we met with the Cumberland County Commissioners. There again I had the opportunity to present my solution to their problem of the illiteracy of mothers-on-welfare, inmates in their prison, victims of drug abuse. But, here again, interest in a program that had proved successful in an adjacent county was nil. The Senator too must have sensed their indifference, for he tried to comfort me then with the words, "These things take time."

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These stories, my confidante that day heard in detail. But this time his response to my frustration went beyond his usual murmurs of consolation. He shared a frustration of his own ~ his failure to help his nephew succeed in school.

Tom, (not his real name) he complained, had, so far, succeeded in remaining a failing sixth grader in special ed classes with others wearing a variety of the latest labels to account for their failures. In spite of the best efforts of his grandmother and uncle, Tom had managed to maintain failing grades.

And so my confessor that day offered me temporary remission - opportunity to work with Tom - sacrificial lamb to both our frustrations.

Thus it happened that one gray afternoon in March, Tom and I faced each other across the table on our porch to fight the war on words.

Let me say now that never in the history of all my years facing classes in a suburban New York high school, or as a volunteer for more than six years in prison with classes that had included convicted murderers, a kidnapper, and an arsonist, had I encountered so much congealed anger coiled inside so small a container. To touch its outer edge I felt would have frozen my fingers fast. What *HAD* I got myself into this time?

I began our proposed ten bouts with the English language by surrendering my first weapon: admission that I could not "learn" him or anyone else anything. Learning must be the sole responsibility of the learner, perhaps nature's way of insuring individuality in the human race or hope for its future.

My second weapon was an object placed on the table without comment, with the hope that he would ask questions about it. Each question he might ask would open doors to further explorations about how words work.

My third and last weapon with which to challenge a language system that too often did not follow its own rules or patterns was my program. Within it were embedded tricks to catch the unwary explorer.

We began our travels by finding a satisfactory definition of the word 'letter.' We ended them with a blueprint for reading and writing sentences.

Would that I could report success in this attempt to resolve our frustrations ~ my beautician and mine. But, alas, the sacrificial lamb would not cooperate.

Sadly, Tom had done only the minimum amount of independent exploring. He refrained religiously from asking questions. Even the provocations of items placed on the table - pictures, miniature Viking ship, a pair of dice, an odd shaped stone, two buffalo, or sentences with no obvious sense like ~

Her purple pearls were worth thirty dollars

were studiously ignored. He had left all questioning to me.

Nor had I been able to penetrate the privacy of his controlled anger. Neither could I evoke any humor about the stupidity of the English language.

Only once had I won. That victory I shall treasure forever. At the end of a lesson, on his way to the door, he turned to glance down at the two miniature buffalo on the table and asked his only question, "What's with the buffalo?"

So, after the seventh lesson, I decided to play my last card and risk all. I gave Tom the opportunity to decide whether or not to finish the last two lessons. Now Tom knew that the last two lessons would involve his writing two paragraphs, a 'place' and a 'person' paragraph. Its writing would require him to follow specific instructions.

I lost.

I accepted his bouquet of flowers and his decision NOT to complete our explorations together with dignity, concealing my disappointment. Tom's last words to me revealed for the first time that he had a sense of humor, "At least now I know what a letter is."

Following my example, Tom's uncle told me that he and Tom's grandmother too decided to place all responsibility for learning squarely on Tom's shoulders. They would help him only upon request.

POSTSCRIPT

Months later I found in our mail box a copy of Tom's report card for the first term of the new school year after our hours together. He had passed tests that placed him in the seventh grade with old friends.

The card reported all A's except in music and art.

Attendance and punctuality were recorded as 100%.

Evaluations of attitudes were all positive.

WHAT *WAS* WITH THE BUFFALO?

POSTLUDE

~ ~ ~ ~

With these selected stories, mostly from those hours voluntarily spent behind bars, I close a door of my own.

Behind this door remain memories of my partner in crime Arlene Shealer and those unforgettable prisoners who came to share my fascination with words. Nor will I forget that assistant to the dean in Gettysburg College who delayed her Christmas vacation to be with us that dark night of Lennie's sentence to life imprisonment.

Untold here are other stories remembered ~ why Arlene and I collapse with laughter at the words "pencil sharpener" or "buffalo."

Or why Arlene frowns when I recall her answer to a confused new entrant's mumbled whisper, "What are you in for?"

Or her answer to a guard's casual inquiry about the cause of that loud crash he had heard when we entered the classroom that evening. (A large table had collapsed.) Our expectations of guards appearing, guns drawn, had perhaps been a bit much.

"We were attacked, violated, and dismembered," Arlene answered on our way to the door.

Or Mr. Pennsylvania's reply to me after I had quietly told him his name would not be among those called next time because he had not contributed anything so far to our classes.

"I could buy and sell you any time I wanted," he replied haughtily.

The doors were unlocked for us the last time after the warden had assigned all our students to house duty from the hours of seven to nine every Monday night. When our last student reported to us that he had been assigned to commissary duty, we suspected our time was up.

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The Superior Court Judge, who had kept us there, his Exchange Club, and his prison advisory board recognized our departure.

Our departure had been imminent anyway. I had been planning to move from Gettysburg and Arlene was about to enter York College in pursuit of a degree in Criminal Justice. An Adult Basic Education employee told us when we surrendered our license to administer GED examinations that as far as she knew we had served the longest term as volunteers in a Pennsylvania prison.

Yet those doors closed to me in the past still haunt me. I know now how securely they had been locked then and are today. But I still keep wondering WHY. So I continue to ask questions ~ mainly addressed to myself ~ except once when I wrote to ten college teachers, recipients of government grants, asking them to name the literacy program they used. Nine returned the post card I had enclosed. All nine named the same one and no other.

And so may others, enthralled by words and the need to share them, always find doors open to them.

All that remains to mark our presence there may be a blackboard ~ ordered for us by the Judge and probably paid for by the generous sums held from profits from purchases by inmates to be spent for them. There may also be a homemade bulletin board and shelves built to hold books donated by the community and a permanent collection from the Adams County Library.

But there would be no pencil sharpeners.

W H Y ? ? ?

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WHY ~ did that young lawyer stop me on Baltimore Street in Gettysburg one autumn morning years ago to inform me that he and his colleagues did not appreciate efforts to improve the literacy of prisoners? Were not these breakers of the law smart enough to find their way into prison without help?

WHY ~ are our elected officials powerless to move those government employees provided to them? A popular state representative recently admitted his inability to require an entrenched bureaucrary to act upon his suggestions. Perhaps a Wall Street Journal editor (July 1, 1999) had an answer ~

"... a bureaucracy's greatest power is to ensure that nothing happens."

WHY ~ would a chief of a Pennsylvania education office refuse to review at the request of a state senator a program designed to help solve the Pennsylvania illiteracy problem? And WHY would a retired chief be vilified as not being a "team player" because he gave grants to such programs, or at least tried to give them?

WHY ~ would county commissioners also made aware of programs other than the visible one show no interest in help for that part of their constituency in need of all the help that could be found for them?

WHY ~ would Governor Ridge and his Secretary of Education, so seemingly sincere in their efforts to serve those that elected them, not acknowledge receipt of response to their invitations to help?

WHY ~ would Congressman Goodling, Education Chairman, be apparently unable to get the attention of bureaus like FAMILY LITERACY, or question a possible conflict of interest there where only one program, edited by its administrator, is permitted?

WHY ~ after Mrs. Casey (wife of a former Governor) advise that she does not support specific literacy programs, go on to appear with Mrs. George Bush (wife of a former President) in Harrisburg congratulating a student for learning to read after two years' instruction in a specific program?

WHY ~ do Pennsylvania State prison administrators, who speak at their meetings of a shortage of teachers to help inmates standing in line for classes, refuse to accept retired teachers volunteering to fill the gap?

WHY ~ do churches, quick to support golf outings, Singles Clubs, social activities outside the church, sports events for teenagers, refuse to offer opportunities for their members to improve basic skills when the injunction is to improve MIND, Body and Spirit? For that matter WHY do benevolent organizations not include basic education in their efforts to help their communities? (YMCA ~ YWCA ~ AAUW ~ Kiwanis ~ ...)

WHY ~ do administrators in school systems, so often labeled in the press as "failed," not answer letters offering needed help, like sponsoring an English Language Club or a program to help students improve language skills of fellow classmates, while at the same time raising their own test scores? When people in the news like Diane Ravitch, former Secretary of Education, Joseph Epstein, former popular editor of American Scholar, and Jacques Barzun, author of BEGIN HERE find time to answer my letters addressed to them, could not administrators find time to acknowledge receipt of letters written often in answer to their appeals for help?

WHY ~ are high school English teachers regarded as not interested in the teaching of reading as part of their responsibilities as I was told by an editor of THE ENGLISH JOURNAL when she acknowledged receipt of a manuscript I had submitted? Are English high school teachers unaware that colleges are beginning to discontinue remedial courses for the unprepared? I am aware of only one English teacher in a senior high school who has assumed teaching sophisticated reading skills as part of her curriculum.

WHY ~ do the media, so quick to expose the problems illiteracy provokes, seldom dare to enter the battle and offer solutions?

WHY ~ are my fellow citizens in this great nation so seemingly indifferent to the quality of education delivered to their children? Could they still be influenced by NEA's advice years ago that parents leave the teaching of their children to their teachers and keep out? Are parents really as blind to being short-changed by a system they should be able to trust? To test the efficacy of their children's education through high school, they might ask their teen-agers to "write" these words:

FIELD	DINER	GIGANTIC	COLLAR	MARRIAGE
DECEIT	OCCURRED	SAFETY	PIGEON	COLORFUL

If they spell them all correctly, the parents can assume their children have a knowledge of letter patterns in familiar words.

WHY ~ does it seem that the citizens of our country are apparently indifferent to solutions to a problem that threatens their very survival in a nation's capability to govern itself through elected representatives?

WHY? . . .

Dorothy S. Murray

It must, I think, be rare in a democracy for a man (or woman) suddenly to conceive a system of ideas far different from those accepted by his contemporaries and I suppose that, even should such an innovation arise, he would have great difficulty in making himself heard to begin with, and even more, in convincing people.

Alexis de Tocqueville
1805 - 1859